

STRATEGIC GOAL 3

CONSERVING NATURAL RESOURCES AND ENHANCING THE ENVIRONMENT



This constructed wetland near Jackson Hole, Wyoming, will provide good habitat for migrating waterfowl.

Sound environmental stewardship of agricultural land benefits wildlife and provides food and fiber to Americans and the rest of the world. Conservation of the Nation's cropland, forests, and grazing land helps provide clean water and air, protects soil productivity, and benefits wildlife populations.

Farmers, ranchers, and private forest landowners manage two-thirds of the Nation's land. They are the primary stewards of American soil, air, and water. To ensure that our Nation's landowners have the needed tools to be good stewards, FSA has traditionally taken aggressive leadership in helping agriculture with conservation programs designed to provide environmental benefits.

Agriculture affects natural resources and the environment. FSA administers conservation programs with producers and other partners, particularly NRCS. The Agency's goal is to protect natural resources and environmental interests while supporting the Nation's farmers and ranchers in retaining soil productivity, improving water and air quality, and enhancing wildlife habitat.

FSA programs also support compliance with provisions for highly-erodible lands and wetlands by improving conservation practices and increasing the number of acres with conservation cover. FSA provides incentives to target conservation benefits through the following programs:

- Emergency Conservation Program (ECP),
- Debt for Nature Program,
- Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), and
- Grassland Reserve Program (GRP).

The Agency also partners with State and local governments to target specific problem environmental areas through the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP). FSA works to limit the negative effects of agricultural production by supporting the restoration of wetlands and helping farmers and ranchers install riparian and grassland buffers. Through ECP, FSA will continue to help farmers restore lands damaged by natural disasters and install wells in times of prolonged droughts.

Farmers and ranchers have done a great deal to improve the environment in the past 20 years. Soil erosion decreased by more than 1 billion tons per year, and for the first time in the Nation's history, net acres of wetlands increased. Many sportsman groups have seen huge increases in pheasant and duck numbers in the past 20 years. These significant improvements in environmental quality result partly from programs implemented by the Farm Service Agency. To maintain effectiveness in this area, FSA established three major strategic objectives and a number of efficiency and outcome-oriented performance measures to achieve its end out-comes.

END OUTCOMES

- Quality Soil
 - Quality Water
 - Quality Wildlife Habitat
 - Quality Air
-

Because two-thirds of the Nation's land belongs to farmers, ranchers and other private landowners, FSA offers them assistance to offset the cost of stewardship of these private lands by providing economic incentives and reimbursements for conservation maintenance practices. By maintaining a high level of stewardship, FSA protects the human and natural environment. These outcomes help the Nation meet society's demand for improved environmental quality and ultimately benefit society at large. To achieve these goals, FSA will continue to partner with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), NRCS, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and other State and private conservation and environmental organizations to maintain a high level of stewardship of the Nation's land, air, and water.

END OUTCOME MEASURES

QUALITY SOIL

- M1: Reduced erosion rates.

QUALITY WATER

- M1: Reduced ground and surface water contamination.

QUALITY WILDLIFE HABITAT

- M1: Increased populations of targeted species.

QUALITY AIR

- M1: Increased tons of carbon dioxide sequestered.
-

INTERMEDIATE OBJECTIVES

IMPROVING CONSERVATION PRACTICES

PERFORMANCE MEASURES

- M1: Maintain or increase the percentage of acres in compliance with highly erodible land and wetland provisions.
- M2: Increase the percentage of conservation acres with invasive species controls.

FSA plays a role in combating invasive species, and is poised to provide and/or cooperate in innovative conservation and environmental protection partnerships in that needed effort. FSA will increase the percentage of acres with invasive species controls by:

- Ensuring proper planting and management standards are used to establish a vegetative cover on the 34.9 million acres in long-term CRP contracts. This includes oversight, review, and spot checks to certify that invasive species are controlled. Participants are encouraged to use native legumes, forbs, shrubs and plant mixes and to ensure the approved seeding mix does not include weed species, including noxious weed species. Producers are also required to control weeds (including noxious weeds), insects, and other pests during the contract period.
- Using GRP rental agreements to assure that GRP land is managed to maintain the vitality of the plant community. Conservation plans will require management practices necessary to control invasive species.

FSA also requires producers to comply with sodbuster and swampbuster provisions as a condition for receiving USDA benefits. With conservation compliance through approved conservation plans, more erodible land is protected and there is less agricultural production on wetlands.

TARGETING LANDS TO MAXIMIZE CONSERVATION BENEFITS

PERFORMANCE MEASURES

- M1: Increase acres managed under Continuous Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) sign-up.
- M2: Increase general sign-up acres in priority areas.
- M3: Reduce average processing time of conservation offers through partnerships and technology: FSA time and partner time.

The Conservation Reserve Program remains the largest Governmental conservation program for private lands. Current enrollment exceeds 34 million acres, with CRP lands in all 50 States and Puerto Rico.

The CRP continues to be acknowledged for its environmental benefits generated by long-term conservation contracts protecting soil, water, air, and wildlife resources. By establishing conservation covers on cropland for 10 to 15 years, CRP assures that Americans receive an environmental annuity.

In 2003, the CRP:

- Reduced soil erosion by 446 million tons,
- Reduced nitrogen applications by 661,000 tons and phosphorus applications by 103,000 tons, and
- Sequestered more than 17 million metric tons of carbon dioxide.

Land is targeted and enrolled in the CRP precisely where the conservation benefits are likely to have the greatest effect. Land is not homogenous, so targeting specific areas and practices increases the benefits from conservation. FSA also seeks to improve service and program delivery by decreasing the average conservation contract processing time. Partnerships with State governments via CREP target critical resource areas affected by agricultural production and allow for locally tailored conservation solutions and measures.

FSA intends to keep its policies and conservation programs focused on:

- reducing erosion rates,
- slowing ground and surface water contamination,
- benefiting wildlife populations, and
- increasing tons of carbon dioxide sequestered.

MITIGATING ADVERSE IMPACTS FROM AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION

PERFORMANCE MEASURES

- M1: Increase CRP acres of riparian and grass buffers.
- M2: Increase percentage of CCC sites where remediation is implemented.
- M3: Increase CRP restored wetlands acres.

The 2002 Farm Bill was landmark legislation. It sharpened FSA's focus on the environment by providing the most significant increase in funding for conservation on private lands in the Nation's history. The conservation provisions in the Farm Bill allow FSA to help farmers and ranchers meet the many environmental challenges that may affect their land.

Making conservation buffers and other highly beneficial practices eligible for continuous enrollment helped increase program participation rates and gained greater environmental benefits. Since the inception of these programs through the close of FY 2004, CRP, CREP, and Continuous CRP have enrolled 34.9 million acres, including:

- 1.6 million acres of riparian buffers and grass filters that provide cleaner water by intercepting sediment and nutrients before they reach surface waters.
- 1.9 million acres of wetlands and wetland buffers that increase prime wildlife habitat and water storage capacity, leading to a net increase in wetland acres on agriculture land.

To ensure the continued success of this conservation effort, FSA developed program goals and performance measures to monitor progress and demonstrate effective stewardship of the Nation's land, air, and water.

MEANS AND STRATEGIES

To achieve the objectives for the Conservation Reserve Program, FSA will:

- Pursue the President's commitment to full enrollment of CRP up to 39.2 million acres authorized in the 2002 Farm Security and Rural Investment Act.
- Ensure that the benefits of CRP continue by offering early reenrollments and extensions of existing contracts to current CRP participants.
- Partner with other agencies and organizations to promote conservation and ensure that all producers are made aware of program deadlines and requirements.
- Target CRP enrollment to ensure that CRP continues its strong protection of the environment and natural resources, including enhancing wildlife habitat, improving air quality, reducing soil erosion and protecting surface and groundwater quality.
- Seek public comment to improve the conservation provided by the CRP.

EXTERNAL FACTORS

External factors that will challenge FSA's ability to achieve its desired outcomes and program results under Goal 3 include:

- The characteristics of the enrolled lands depend on which lands are offered for contract, because CRP is a voluntary program;
- Favorable market prices that may entice producers into leaving targeted lands in crop production.
- Natural disasters or severe drought which may diminish program participation;
- Non-compliance with program provisions that may reduce the effectiveness of the program.
- Demand for enrollment which may exceed authorized enrollment levels;
- Appropriations that may be insufficient to deliver technical assistance, provide cost-sharing assistance to rehabilitate farmlands damaged by natural disasters, and continue remediation efforts at former CCC grain storage facilities; and
- Exposure to hazardous substances, which may pose a threat to human and animal health and the environment, could also reduce the acreage available for program participation.